



Addressing structural violence through US reconciliation commissions: The case study of Greensboro, NC and Detroit, MI



Joshua Inwood ^{*,1}, Derek Alderman, Melanie Barron

University of Tennessee Department of Geography, 1000 Philip Fulmer Way, Knoxville, TN 37996, USA

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ABSTRACT

Across the United States, communities encumbered by violence, economic injustice, legacies of oppression and continued social, economic, and political marginalization are increasingly turning toward truth and reconciliation commissions (TRC) to address and remedy persistent inequality. While modeled after the international truth movement, TRCs in the United States are often not state-sanctioned and characterized by fundamental differences that beg the question: *How are peace and justice dialectically linked to, and flow from geographic specific understandings of violence?* Drawing from the TRC experiences of Greensboro (NC) and Detroit (MI), this paper examines the way communities that were burdened with a history of violence are turning toward TRCs as viable vehicles for addressing violence and inequality in contemporary US society. This paper furthers our understanding of the geographic ruptures violence creates in communities and the often hidden realities that the legacy and memory of violence has for oppressed people in the United States.

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In November of 2011 several hundred people from across the metro-Detroit region crowded into Cobo Hall in downtown Detroit to witness and celebrate the empaneling of the “Metropolitan Detroit Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (MDTRC). The atmosphere was electric as nine commissioners took their oaths, read aloud their mandate and began their work. The MDTRC is charged with investigating regional segregation and the effects that segregation had in the 1967 Detroit Uprising. Colloquially referred to as the “Detroit Riot,” the uprising began after white police officers raided several African American after-hours clubs on 23 July 1967. After an altercation, members of the African American community began to protest aggressive police tactics in the city, leading to unrest in which wide swaths of the city were destroyed over several days. While long blamed for contemporary Detroit’s decline (urban blight, white flight, and poor race relations) the uprising has deeper implications. It was the hope of the MDTRC that the commission would provide a venue to understand the conditions that gave rise to segregation in the city and the continuing significance of the now almost fifty year old uprising for those who live in the city and the region.

For commissioners, ministers, activists, and local residents the results of the commission’s work were disappointing. Over the first year, commitment waned as three commissioners resigned from their

positions (one person transferred jobs to another state and two others resigned over disagreements with the mandate and focus of the commission). The commission was criticized for ignoring Detroit’s grassroots organizations at the expense of regional players whose motivations were seen as suspect. Additionally, the work that the commission has accomplished has been overwhelmed by Detroit declaring bankruptcy (the largest municipal bankruptcy proceedings in the history of the United States), controversial plans by billionaire Dan Gilbert to redevelop downtown, and the election of Detroit’s first white mayor since the 1970s. The disappointment over the truth commission’s progress is exacerbated by comparisons with another truth commission, in Greensboro, North Carolina, that completed its mission and is seen as far more successful in its work and vision.

The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC) was formed in 2000 in response to the murder of labor and civil rights organizers in 1979 in Greensboro, North Carolina by members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). In 1999 local community organizers began advocating for a truth and reconciliation commission modeled after the international truth movement, most notably the truth commission in South Africa and Peru. After securing funding, seating commissioners, and taking testimony from survivors, perpetrators of violence, and local citizens and officials the GTRC released its report. The commission in Greensboro is a model for other communities wishing to engage with and in *truth work* in the United States.

While the disappointments with Detroit and the direction of its commission are unique to the metro-Detroit region, other aspects of the struggle, when compared with Greensboro and the GTRC,

^{*} Corresponding author. Department of Geography, University of Tennessee, 1000 Philip Fulmer Way, Knoxville, TN 37996, USA. Tel.: +865 974 6170; Fax: +865 974 6025.

E-mail address: jinwood@utk.edu (J. Inwood).

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are indicative of fundamental tensions peace and justice activists must confront when dealing with the legacy of racism and the consequences of violence. More specifically the failures of the Detroit commission draw attention to contradictions that challenge activists who want to forge new understandings and materialities of justice by connecting violent events with ongoing racialized inequities. In order to achieve their goals, activists must effectively confront legacies, memories, and ongoing realities of violence that establishment forces in the United States are loathe to revisit. Thus the MDTRC and the GTRC present compelling opportunities to examine place-based physical and structural violence and beg the question: *How are peace and justice materially linked to, and flow from, geographically contextual experiences, expressions, and examinations of violence within communities?*

To address this question this paper proceeds with the following sections. First, we address the broader literature associated with the Truth and Reconciliation movement. This section draws distinctions between the international truth movement and domestic US truth movement focusing on the “unofficial” nature of the US effort at reconciliation. Following this discussion the manuscript proceeds to engage with the changing nature of violence within neoliberal modes of production. Critically we argue that neoliberal modes of production are predicated on the retreat of the state from social service provision and have opened up spaces for grassroots activists to engage in reconciliation processes. This has implications not only for the way social scientists understand violence, but also for the way the social sciences conceive of the work of peace. To address the overarching research question the authors have engaged in an in depth qualitative analysis that includes interviews, participant observation and archival research. Interviews were open-ended, with questions guiding the conversation along a series of themes, including the participant’s personal involvement in the truth process, their conceptions of justice, and their hopes and reservations about the reconciliation process. We conclude by offering some remarks about the role of peace in understandings of violence.

Conceptual framework

Truth and reconciliation commissions

Conventional truth and reconciliation commissions have been organized in a number of countries that have undergone periods of violence and oppression, such as post-Apartheid South Africa, or war-torn Uganda (e.g. Chandler, 2003; Hamber, 2006; Handy, 2003; Lerner, 2007; Nevins, 2003; Ross, 2004; Verwoerd, 2003). Historically, truth commissions are “bodies set up to investigate a past history of violations of human rights in a particular country,” and are usually sponsored by some governmental organization (Hayner, 1994, p. 600). While the TRC structure and mandate are flexible, truth commissions generally “operate for a specific time, with a mandate to address human rights violations that occurred during a determined period in a nation’s history” (Ross, 2004, p. 73). Proponents of truth commissions argue for “reconciliation between former adversaries as well as [facilitate a] transition to a more just, democratic, and peaceful political order” (Nevins, 2003, p. 677). Additionally, TRC processes are seen as an effort to restore fractured civil relationships in societies that continue to experience the consequences of violence (Philpott, 2006). This includes a range of policy options including forgiveness, a focus on creating more democratic conditions, and the reconstitution of political communities (Murphy, 2010).

A key component of the truth and reconciliation process focuses on peace building. Peace building encompasses a wide variety of activities, but the main focus is to prevent the outbreak, recurrence, or continuance of violence (Borer, 2006, p. 12). Borer argues that it takes both negative and positive tasks to build a lasting peace.

Negative tasks focus on the *prevention* of violence. These can include peacekeepers, criminal proceedings and the removal of repressive political regimes. Positive tasks are those that encourage the growth of social, political, and legal institutions that *ameliorate* the underlying causes of conflict and violence (Borer, 2006, p. 14). These can include measures that create new legal frameworks and interpretations, support for political institutions, and revitalization of social and economic practices (Borer, 2006, p. 15). While some truth and reconciliation commissions have negative peace building tasks as integral to their mandate (e.g. the prosecution of war crimes), such commissions also nearly always have positive peace building tasks as well. Thus truth commissions play a primary role in addressing “structural violence.” However, another, often equally critical, goal is to facilitate the creation of a “positive peace” which requires “some degree of socioeconomic justice and equality” (Rigby, 2001, p. 11).

The path to building this positive peace, however, is anything but straightforward and is fraught with tensions. Critically a relationship exists between positive and negative peace and it is that tension and relationship that are central to understanding how reconciliation processes proceed (Lerner, 2007). For example, truth and reconciliation efforts that provide immunity to perpetrators of violence, a “positive” attempt to avoid the potentially harmful effects of putting community members through the penal system, may ultimately call into question the validity of the whole process for those whose vision of justice includes state-sanctioned retribution (Bassiouni, 1997). Such tensions animate international truth commissions and often serve as the basis for political compromise brought about by evolving notions of reconciliation.

The truth movement in the United States departs from these conventional understandings in several important ways. As we argue, the truth and reconciliation movement in the United States serves as an important departure point for problematizing notions of transitional justice and focuses on the ways oppressed people are trying to harness the rhetorical and discursive power of truth commissions to grapple with materially grounded oppressive conditions. Furthermore we argue that this reality in the US is a result of neoliberal modes of production that have structurally changed the political economy of the United States. Given the limitations imposed on United States TRC movements because of their “unofficial” nature, the efforts of domestic TRCs are meant to give oppressed groups “an understanding of both institutions and apparatuses, an understanding of law, and also an understanding of techniques for their application with the framework determined by the state” (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 53). Though reconciliation movements in the United States are not officially sanctioned, they *are* important vehicles for communities to illuminate geographies of unequal access and patterns of institutional discrimination while also giving participants the tools necessary to disrupt those processes. Therefore, rather than being a state-driven process, the United States transitional justice movement intentionally works in tension with the state as a grassroots organizing strategy.

Magarrell and Wesley (2008) note that TRC processes in the United States are usually begun after a period of community activism, when it becomes increasingly clear that state authorities are either uninterested in the events, or potentially complicit in the violence that occurred. As a consequence most of the TRCs in the United States are met with official indifference or even hostility. This makes it difficult for TRCs in the United States to engage in many of the *negative* peace tasks associated with international reconciliation tribunals that require cooperation from the state criminal justice system. Nor would they necessarily want to engage in that system, as, in the United States context, the criminal justice system is often intimately connected with the ongoing production of oppressed communities (Inwood, 2015; Gilmore, 1999, 2002). Point-in-fact, in Greensboro, survivors wrote an open letter to state and local prosecutors asking that new information that could lead to

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